

THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

PUBLIC RELATIONS OFFICE
CLEVELAND, OHIO 44106
TELEPHONE 421-7346

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The Cleveland Museum of Art has acquired a rare and important painting by the 16th century German master, Matthias Grünewald, Sherman E. Lee, Director of the Museum, has announced.

The painting, a work of exceptional individuality, depicts the Christian martyr St. Catherine of Alexandria, holding in her right hand the sword of her martyrdom. It has been installed in the Museum's Early German and Flemish Paintings gallery on the second floor, and goes on view today (September 17) for its first public showing in over 300 years.

"Great works of art, particularly as rare as those by Grünewald, become available only too infrequently. We feel particularly fortunate to have been able to acquire the St. Catherine, especially since only one other painting by this master is in the United States, the Small Crucifixion at the National Gallery in Washington," Dr. Lee says.

"It is a beautiful, mysterious painting," Dr. Lee continues, "and, further, of great importance historically, as it is the first direct evidence we have for the hitherto presumed lost Altar of the Virgin, Queen of Heaven, a multi-panel altarpiece executed circa 1517-1520 for the Cathedral at Mainz.

"The St. Catherine panel gives hope that perhaps the remainder of the altarpiece was not lost at sea during the Thirty Years' War, as reported in 1675 by Grünewald's biographer, Joachim von Sandrart."

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The Mainz altarpiece is a mature work of the artist, following but a few years after the Isenheim Altar (ca. 1505-1515), Grünewald's masterpiece now in the Musée d'Unterlinden in Colmar, France. In the past, it has been known primarily through a series of drawings in German and Dutch public collections, and through Sandrart's description of it in his Teutsche Academie der Edlen Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste (1675):

' . . . Furthermore, there were those works done by his noble hand in the Mainz Cathedral in the side chapels on the left side of the choir, three different altarpieces, each with two wings painted inside and out;

' Of these, one represented the Madonna with the Infant in a cloud; down below on earth many saints of remarkable gracefulness were in attendance, such as St. Catherine, Barbara, Cecelia, Elizabeth, Apollonia, and Ursula, all of them of great nobility, naturalness, sweet innocence and drawn correctly, so beautifully colored that they appeared to belong more to heaven than to earth.

' Another panel showed a blind hermit who walks on the frozen river Rhine with his guide boy, and is assaulted by two murderers and killed, falling on the crying boy. . . .

' The third was not as perfect as the other two. . . .'

Among the Grünewald drawings, several in the collection of the Print Room, Berlin-Dahlem usually are associated with the Mainz altar. One of St. Catherine, believed to be a preliminary study for the altarpiece, shows the basic composition of the figure as it is depicted on the Cleveland panel (a painting on wood measuring 48 inches high by 33 inches wide), but also reveals the significant changes and adjustments made by the artist in the finished work.

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The disappearance of the altarpiece, however, remains clouded with rumor involving a long and bitter war, the looting of art treasures, and a shipwreck.

In the winter of 1631, the battlefield of the Thirty Years' War had shifted from the north of Germany to the south. The Roman Catholic bishoprics along the Main River fell to the Protestant forces of King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden, and by Christmas, the archbishopric of Mainz was occupied by the Swedes.

During the turmoil of this period, according to Sandrart, all of the Mainz altarpieces were looted and dispatched to Sweden by boat, but perished in route when the boat foundered.

Whether or not the panels were involved in a shipwreck is the subject of some debate, and the exact story of their disappearance is still to be unraveled.

Grünwald and his contemporary, Albrecht Dürer, are considered the two great masters of the German Renaissance. Yet Dürer has been widely known since his own time, while Grünewald has remained less famous until the present century.

Documentary material about his life and work is meager, and his fame rests primarily on a small number of magnificent paintings.

He is believed to have been born in Würzburg circa 1470/80, and known to have died in Halle in 1528. Most commonly he is known as Matthias Grünewald, the name given him by his biographer Sandrart.

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Some early sources, such as the inscription on a drawing for the Virgin in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, document his one time residence in Ossenburg, now Aschaffenburg. The name "(O)ssenburg" also appears in the remnants of an old inscription on the back of the Cleveland panel, followed two lines below by the name of the city Mentz, now Mainz, with part of the letter "M" missing.

For several years Grünewald was attached to the court of the Archbishop-Elector of Mainz, Uriel of Gemmingen, as painter, and he continued as court artist under Uriel's successor, Albrecht of Brandenburg.

Little more than 20 paintings by the artist survive, nine of which are part of the Isenheim Altar in Colmar. Most of the others are preserved in German and Swiss public collections, including those in Munich, Basel, Frankfurt, and Karlsruhe.

"Grünewald is one of the great masters in the history of painting, his work a striking synthesis of late Gothic and Renaissance painting, often juxtaposing the two worlds for expressive aims," Dr. Lee says.

"His paintings appeal to the viewer's emotions, creating mystical and haunting visions. We are fortunate to be able to add one of the master's few surviving works, the panel of St. Catherine, to our small but fine collection of German painting," Dr. Lee states.

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For additional information or photographs, contact Frances Stamper, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106; (216) 421-7340.

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